



Three Studies of Buile Suibhne: Perspectives and Reassessments

Fomin, M. (2018). Three Studies of Buile Suibhne: Perspectives and Reassessments. *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 64(1), 443–451. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zcph-2017-0010>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie

Publication Status:
Published (in print/issue): 25/01/2018

DOI:
[10.1515/zcph-2017-0010](https://doi.org/10.1515/zcph-2017-0010)

Document Version
Author Accepted version

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Besprechungen

CAREY, John (ed.): *Buile Suibhne: Perspectives and reassessments*. London/Dublin: Irish Texts Society, Subsidiary Series 26, 2014. xiii, 232 S., ISBN 978-0-95756-612-5. € 21.

The medieval Irish saga *Buile Shuibhne* ('The Frenzy of Suibhne', hereinafter *BS*) has attracted scholars' attention for over a hundred years. Since the first publication of the tale for the Irish Texts Society by J. O'Keeffe in 1913 (reprinted in 1996 with a new introduction by J.F. Nagy), the tale has been subjected to intensive inquiry by Jackson (1940, 1953), Chadwick (1942), Lehmann (1953–4, 1955), Carney (1955), Ó Riain (1974), and more recently, Mac Mathúna (1981), Nagy (1982–3), Carey (1984), Frykenberg (1984), Pehnt (1999), Mikhailova (1999), Slavin (2006), Bergholm (2012) and many others.

The volume under review is different from the similar collections published in the Irish Texts Society Subsidiary Series. Firstly, it has been dedicated to the memory of Seamus Heaney, whose untimely departure prevented him from speaking about his own translation of *Buile Shuibhne* from the Irish language (Heaney 1983). Secondly, "one radical reinterpretation of the figure of the *geilt*" (p. xii) by Ó Riain (1972), was republished here – "the first time that a volume in this series has thus returned earlier material to print" (*ibid.*).

The first and foremost aspect of the study of any medieval Irish text is the question of its dating. This problem is the focus of the paper by Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Cult of St Moling and the Making of *Buile Shuibhne*' (pp. 1–42), who proposes, in her own words, "a new theory on the making of *Buile Shuibhne*" (p. 1). She founds her thesis upon the first recension of *The Battle of Mag Rath* (dated to the early tenth century by Dillon 1946: 65) which does not contain any references to Suibhne and his frenzy. *Contra* Jackson (1953), and in line with Carney's suggestion on the influence of Moling's tradition (1955: 143–9), she goes on to propose that the legend of Suibhne originated in Leinster, independently of similar legends of Myrddin, Merlin and Lailoken found in other Celtic-speaking countries. Furthermore, she tries to establish the chronological order of the development of the legend in various texts (*Bórama Laigen*, late Middle Irish poems from Brussels MS 5100–4, and a Leinster section of *Acallam na Senórach*) where Suibhne is mentioned. She also proposes that the relation between Suibhne and St Moling belongs to the earliest stratum of the story.

Much attention is given to the figure of St Moling. The mention of the saint in the ninth-century martyrology *Félire Oengusso* testifies to the importance of his cult, as he was already promoted as a patron saint of the Laigin in the ninth century *Cath Almaine*. Ní Dhonnchadha attributes the compilation of *BS* to this period, when the ruling dynasties of Leinster patronised “a rich seam of literature attesting to this”, which “emanated from churches in Uí Dunlainge and Uí Cheinnselaig” (p. 8), the burst of this activity, in her view, taking place in the period from 738 to 1042 A.D.

Suffice it to say that Bergholm (2012) proposes a different view. Taking into account a literary, rather than historical development of the legend, she argues that the importance of the “so-called Celtic Wild Man tradition” cannot be underestimated (although, in her own words, “the figure of the Wild Man is a ‘mythic universal’ that has originated spontaneously in different cultures”, Bergholm 2012: 79).

Central to the figure of the Wild Man in Celtic tradition is his affinity with the saintly figure (“for which Jerome’s *Life of Paul the First Hermit* provided the Christian prototype”, where, in the words of Frykenberg, “the figure of the beast-man had already converged with that of the desert holy-man in the ‘legend of the hairy anchorite’”, p. 53). In this way, the pair of Suibhne and St Moling is no exception to the Christian literary prototype, since the madman had been attached to the saint in the Irish tradition at quite an early stage.

Among the earliest sources antedating *Buile Shuibhne* is *Bretha Étgid* ‘Judgements of Inadvertence’ (hereinafter *BÉ*) of late eighth – early ninth century dating, in which Suibhne’s *geltacht* is cited in connection with the battle of Mag Rath: *Cath Maigi Raith. Teora buada in catha-sin: maidm ar congal claen ina anfir re domhnall ina firinne 7 suibne geilt do dul ar geltacht...* (Binchy 1978: 250.35–7) ‘The battle of Mag Rath. Three benefits of this battle: Congal Cláen’s defeat in his falsehood by Domhnall in his righteousness, and Suibhne Geilt going away into the state of frenzy...’. The scribe also attributes the compilation of the source to the time of Domhnall mac Áeda (*aimser do aimsear domhnaill meic aedha meic ainmire*, Binchy 1978: 250.33–4), which can be dated to 642 A.D. (by Binchy 1978: 250.34, note e) or 637 A.D. (by Ní Dhonnchadha, p. 3).

The association of Suibhne and his frenzy with the battle of Mag Rath dated to 637/642 A.D. antedates the promotion of the figure of St Moling from 738 A.D., and in this perspective, Ní Dhonnchadha’s hypothesis of the early association of the saint with the madman in the compilation of the tale should be treated with caution.

What about another saint of the saga whose figure is equally prominent, St Ronan? Mikhailova (1999: 45–56) proposes an interesting hypothesis: both saints have been incorporated into the fabric of the source as doublets and obtained an equal status in the eyes of the compiler:

The episodes of Suibhne meeting St Ronan not only duplicate one another, but also provide a direct parallel to the episodes of Suibhne’s encounters with St Moling. The episodes that involve St Ronan are introductory to the subsequent

development of the saga, and the episodes that involve St Moling conclude the plot. While at the beginning of the saga, Suibhne kills St Ronan's disciple with a spear, in the final episode of the saga, it is St Moling's servant who kills Suibhne with a spear (Mikhailova 1999: 48–9, my trans.).

Mikhailova (1999: 50, also 155–61) notes that the episodes of Suibhne's encounter with the saints function as a framing device: they create a narrative unity, they mirror each other, and the fact that the meetings with the saints are placed at the two opposite points of the story (at the beginning and in the end) turns them into figures that drive the development of the plot, and such an arrangement promotes the main theme of the saga: the crime and its expiation.

Ní Dhonnchadha also arrives at the same conclusion when she describes *BS* as “a romantic tale about the rehabilitation of a murderer” (p. 18), noting, similar to Mikhailova's view expressed above, the duplication of the compiler's effort in his presentation of the death of Suibhne – “the author of *BS* creates a startling ending: he has Suibne die twice” (ibid.). However, in her view, this had been carried out only due to the interest of the compiler in St Moling and his association with one of Moling's churches, which she tentatively identifies as Tech Moling in Co. Kildare.

The second part of Ní Dhonnchadha's contribution is devoted to the development of Suibhne's legend in the Irish textual tradition, where she surveys various instances of Suibhne's appearance in the *Codex Sancti Pauli* poem *M'airiuclán i Túaim Inbir* ('My little oratory in T.I.'), in the Book of Leinster stories relating to St Moling (where Suibhne is not mentioned), in the late Old Irish poem *Meinic m'óing* 'Frequent is my groan' (found in the eleventh century Preface to *Amra Coluimb Cille* and partly in the *Leabhar Breac* version of *Sanas Cormaic*), in the Middle Irish poem *Fuarus inber soirchi sunt* 'I have found a bright river-mouth here' (TCD 1337 60b), and in *Fled Dúin na nGéd* 'Banquet of the Fort of the Geese' (FDG), compiled c. 1103, in which St Moling is absent, but St Ronan is present and plays an important part in the tale that ends with the battle of Mag Rath.

The close of the *Fled Dúin na nGéd* tale is as follows: *ar it é sin teóra búada in chatha sin .i. maidm ria nDomhnall ina fhírinne for Congal ina góí 7 Suibne do dul fri gealtacht* 'these are the three excellencies of this battle, i.e. a victory by Domhnall in his justice over Congal in his falsehood and Suibhne departing into the state of frenzy'. This passage is similar to the passage just cited above from *BÉ*, the latter taken by Ní Dhonnchadha to be derived from the former: “the reference to the ‘three excellencies’ (*teóra búada*) of the battle sits comfortably in *FDG*, indicating that this text was the ultimate source for similar passages found in the Middle Irish commentaries to *Auraicept na nÉces* (*AnÉ*) and *Bretha Étgid*” (p. 30). She refutes the hypothesis that the appearance of the passage in *BÉ* is an argument in favour of “the claim that the Celtic ‘Wild Man’ legend was introduced into Ireland in the seventh, eighth or ninth century” (ibid., see Bergholm 2012: 95 for a view that “the tradition flourishing in Strathclyde could be an inherently more probable basis for the Celtic Wild Man legend”). Ní

Dhonnchadha does provide a full citation of the *AnÉ* passage, but fails to do so for *BÉ*.

One can hardly assign a Middle Irish date to the passage relating to the battle of Mag Rath in *BÉ*. As cited above, *BÉ* notes *teora buada* ‘three benefits’ of the battle, which points to the grammatical treatment of *buaid* ‘victory, advantage’ by the scribe as a feminine *ā*-stem, which is characteristic of the earlier sources (DIL s.v.) in contrast to the *ceithre buada* listed in *AnÉ*, which is both incorrect from the point of view of the Old Irish nominal inflection (**cetheora buada*), and points to the treatment by the scribe of *buaid* as a masc. noun, which is characteristic of later sources.

Note also the verbal difference between the sources. *BÉ* speaks of the falsehood and Congal’s defeat as *maidm ar congal claen ina anfir* lit. ‘defeat on Congal Cláen in his untruthfulness’. This is in contrast to *FDG*’s *maidm ria nDomhnall... for Congal ina góí* ‘victory by Domhnall... over Congal in his falsehood’.¹ Also, the departure of Suibhne into the state of frenzy is described differently: *suibne geilt do dul ar geltacht* (*BÉ*) vs. *Suibne do dul fri gealtacht* (*FDG*). *BÉ*’s scribe in his reference to Congal and Suibhne includes the nicknames *cláen* ‘of a squinting eye’ and *geilt* ‘frenzied’ whereas in *FDG* the heroes are just referred to by their names.

From this perspective, it is hard to agree that one passage is dependent on the other, contrariwise, one is probably dealing here with two passages ultimately going back to a third one, anterior both to *FDG* and *BÉ*. Still, it is hard to disagree with Ní Dhonnchadha that “given the fragmentary nature of tradition, one can hardly expect to arrive at certainty” (p. 42).

The next contribution to be dealt with is ‘The “Death of the Wild-Man” in the Legend of Suibhne Geilt’ by Brian Frykenberg (pp. 43–92) who focuses on a specific poem, *A ben Gráic* ‘Wife of Grác’, and includes the edition of the poem in the appendix A (pp. 78–89) and the discussion of its metre in the appendix B (pp. 90–2). Before he goes on to analyse the poem, Frykenberg glances at the Wild Man legend in the traditions of the world to include the Babylonian and the Indian data, alluding to the legend’s “thematic elaboration according to erotic, primitivist, courtly or eremetical emphases” (p. 45).

The importance of the poem *A ben Gráic* lies in the fact that it presents a different kind of wild man, “a character who finds analogues in the so-called ‘lord of the animals’ (who may appear riding a stag)” (p. 45), which draws a comparison of Suibhne with the figure of Finn, also a hunter and an outsider.²

¹ Mikhailova (1999: 148) proposes a hypothesis that the emphasis on the ‘righteousness’ of the king, exemplified in the figure of Domhnall who overcomes the falsehood of Congal, is the literary device used to outline the importance of the battle of Mag Rath as the battle for the high kingship of Ireland; another unique characteristic of the battle was its original connection with the figure of Suibhne.

² The linkage between Finn and Suibhne has also been usefully integrated by B. Ó Nualláin in his composition of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, see Ó Conáire’s contribution to this volume, pp. 149–53.

Intriguingly, the figure of St Moling is also full of connotations that underline his status outside of society, with plentiful references to the werewolves and the outlaws in his hagiography, as well as his association with wild animals and birds, such as a fox and a wren.

Referring to the Wild Man tradition in Celtic literature, Frykenberg proposes “the Cumbric-speaking Lowlands as a unique expression of the unitary nexus which also gave rise to the Scottish Lailoken and to the Welsh Myrddin” (p. 55).³ In this connection, the figure of Grác in the *Middle Irish Life of Moling* presents a typological parallel to the figures of Lailoken and Myrddin. Grác’s downfall contains his wounding by a metal spear, falling into a fire and drowning in the river.

In Frykenberg’s view, “an oicotype of the threefold death motif [is] distinctively shared by Suibhne, Lailoken and Myrddin” (cf. Jackson 1940), and, in his opinion, the figure of Grác is joined with his “fellow exponents of the developed Irish Sea wild-man legend” (p. 65) through the central theme of “the death of the wild-man”, transforming Grác into the *geilt*’s opposite” (ibid.). The mirroring of the figure of Suibhne, as the *geilt*, in the figure of Grác, as the anti-*geilt*, continues a similar development of the Suibhne literary tradition exemplified in the pair of St Moling and St Ronan in *BS* as counterparts endowed with opposite functions (cf. Mikhailova 1999: 151–6): “Like Suibhne’s demise in *Buile Shuibhne*, and the curses which lead up to it, Grác’s punishment parallels his offence” (p. 67).

Frykenberg also notes that beyond the specific theme of the ‘death of the wild-man’, the poem *A ben Grác* together with *BS* draw upon a common stock of tradition that is not found in the later *Middle Irish Life of Moling*. He points to the elaborate style of the poem’s composition, “allusive, incremental and elliptical” (p. 72), Suibhne’s story being the thread linking zoological lore, elegiac lyric and ascetic prophecies.

The question of the development of the Suibhne literary tradition receives further treatment in Alexandra Bergholm’s ‘The Authorship and Transmission of *Buile Shuibhne*: a Re-appraisal’ (pp. 93–110). She revisits the question of the textual history of the composition, paying particular attention to cultural circumstances which could all have had their influence on the tale’s compilation as well as O’Keeffe’s editorial method which had an ultimate effect on the tale’s perception by those who read it throughout the last century.

In her attempt to uncover the objectives of the medieval scribes, she draws upon the findings of Lehmann (1953–4; 1955) who postulated the continuous character of the compilation of the source. Thus, she surveys the earliest material that contains references to the legend found in verse, the oft-cited passage from *BÉ*, the so-called *Anecdota* poems compiled by Mícheál Ó Cléirigh in Brussels MS 5100-4), showing their fragmentary and varied nature.

³ This runs counter to the views expressed by Ní Dhonnchadha (p. 4) who supported the independent Irish origin of Suibhne, and by Bergholm (2012: 95) who was in favour of Carney’s (1955: 151) hypothesis of its origin in western Scotland.

She maintains the view that the compiler(s) of *BS* created the work from “a mirage of citations” (Barthes, cit. in Culler 2001: 113), “highlighting certain elements, and omitting, correcting, distorting, reinterpreting and inventing others, as the case might be” (p. 101), the legend itself going out of a literary fashion towards the end of the Middle Irish period, and being reinvented again towards the beginning of the early Modern period.

Notwithstanding these discrepancies, the edition carried out by James G. O’Keeffe (1913) was an attempt to join different versions of the text composed in different historical circumstances. The end product, in the opinion of Bergholm, “has ultimately reproduced yet another realisation of the Ideal text” (p. 109), and the publication of *BS* created a scholarly illusion, a personal editorial approximation of the ‘original’ as it might have been.

The figure of James F. O’Keeffe is given further treatment in Pádraigín Riggs’ ‘James George O’Keeffe 1865-1937’ (pp. 111–29). Providing the reader with a view on the history of the scholar’s family, the O’Keeffes of Duhallow, she goes on to talk about his father, who, if F. Mac Coluim’s (1938: 26) account is true, inspired his son’s interest in Irish manuscripts. O’Keeffe’s activities as a manuscript collector could also have been due to the involvement of the family’s neighbour and associate Dónall Mac Cába, who himself was a scribe, having produced a number of manuscripts (one of which, RIA 23 L 59, was presented to E. Knott by O’Keeffe, who donated it to the Academy).

O’Keeffe never took a University degree, having received his training in Old and Middle Irish as a student of the School of Irish Learning (1903–6), where he was also a member of Student’s Committee, Treasurer (1903–1913), and a contributor and editor (with J. Strachan) of the first two volumes of the School’s journal, *Ériu*.

A member of the Irish Literary Society, he was active as a lecturer, organiser of entertainment nights and Irish classes, and co-authored *A Handbook of Irish Dances* (with A. Ó Briain) as his first publication. He became actively involved with the Irish Texts Society, becoming a member of its provisional committee in 1896, and the first Honorary Treasurer from 1898.

The publication of *Buile Shuibhne* was a project in which he got involved on Kuno Meyer’s request. Riggs provides evidence of Meyer and O’Keeffe’s extensive correspondence on *BS* going back to 1907. Originally planned as a contribution to the *Ériu* journal, O’Keeffe then decided to publish the text with the Irish Texts Society, having submitted the complete manuscript to the Society’s board at its 24 March 1912 meeting.

He ceased to be involved in the academic life in 1913, having resumed his civil service, to be quartered in North America and the Middle East for the next decade, when he retired to Surrey in 1926. He published another edition of *BS* in 1931 as the first volume of the newly established Medieval and Modern Irish Series, supported by the Irish Government. O’Keeffe died in December 1937, highly regarded by his colleagues in Celtic Studies as an outstanding scholar and a great friend.

'*At Swim-Two-Birds*: Sweeney and Many Others' by Breandán Ó Conaire (pp. 130–71) provides a glimpse of the creativity of one of the greatest writers of twentieth-century Ireland – Brian Ó Nualláin (better known under his English and Irish pseudonyms as Flann O'Brien and Myles na Gopaleen), and "the 'weird' connections" (p. 130) the narrative of *At Swim-Two-Birds* may have had with various figures of Irish mythology and folklore, Fionn mac Cumhal and Suibhne in particular. Ó Conaire draws our attention to the relevant part of Ó Nualláin's MA thesis on *Nádúir-fhilíocht na Gaeilge* ('Irish nature-poetry'), which shows the writer's fascination with the quality of *BS* as a rich story as well as with the verses attributed to Suibhne. Ó Conaire argues that Ó Nualláin managed "to incorporate the entire story into his narrative, preserving its continuity, characters, events, prose and verse structure, vocabulary and style" (p. 158), yet not through "an act of direct appropriation" (ibid.), but rather by way of a careful and artistic re-fragmentation and re-fashioning of the text.

'A Study of the Irish Legend of the Wild Man' by Pádraig Ó Riain, originally published in *Éigse* 14 (1972), 177–206, concludes the volume (pp. 172–201). In the words of the editor, "articulating a thesis which, despite the passage of the decades, has lost none of its power to enliven and provoke, Ó Riain argues that none of the features which characterise the *geilt* are peculiar to him" (p. xii). Such features that underline "the causative, behaviouristic and restorative motifs" (p. 199) of the story include 'the characteristics of madness' (pp. 175–8), 'a tale of the novice' (pp. 178–80), 'the curse of a *sacerdos*' (pp. 180–2), 'a baffled experience' (pp. 182–4), 'the consumption of contaminated food or drink' (pp. 185–6), 'the loss of a lover' (pp. 186–7), 'the madman takes to the wilderness' (pp. 187–9), 'the madman perches on trees' (pp. 189–91), 'the madman levitates or performs great leaps' (pp. 191–2), 'the madman is very swift' (p. 192), 'the madman is restless and travels great distances' (p. 193), 'the madman experiences hallucinations' (pp. 193–4), 'the madman collects firewood and goes about naked' (pp. 194–5), 'the madman observes a special diet' (pp. 195–7), 'the act of coition' (pp. 197–8), 'the intervention of a *sacerdos*' (p. 198–9). These motifs are not necessarily related to the theme of madness alone. Ó Riain maintains that "the basic theme of separation from wonted or due status" (p. 199) is more important, so that the story of Suibhne can be read as an Irish ecotype of the *rite de passage* universal motif. *BS* observes many characteristics of a typical Irish novitiate genre, found extensively in the Irish literary tradition, with each of its key elements ('separation', 'transition', 'incorporation') having its central role in the development of the plot.

Concluding this review, I would like to draw attention to the opinion expressed by Mikhailova in her study of *BS*:

All of the above-mentioned arguments, strictly speaking, do not provide us with any ground to assign a specific genre to *Buile Shuibhne*, and, on the contrary, they make our task even more complicated... If we were to attribute a specific genre to the text, relying solely on the motif analysis is not enough, since certain themes, such as, for instance, the obtaining of a treasure, could

be characteristic both of a magical fairy tale and of a novel. The scholar must analyse the text's system of narration in its entirety both from the point of view of its contents as well as from that of its expression, taking into account not only its themes and its aggregate of narrative types, but also the style of its exposition" (Mikhailova 1999: 68, my trans.)

The *Buile Shuibhne* compilation, which has been – and undoubtedly will be – studied from multiple points of view and various methodological approaches, creates more questions than scholars are able to resolve, the answers to which, in the words of Bergholm, “appear to amount to a patchwork of fleeting allusions, and references, none of which can be perceived to have more intrinsic authority, or indeed to be of greater authenticity, than any of the others” (p. 101).

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